

READING THE NOVEL



Reading the
European Novel
to 1900

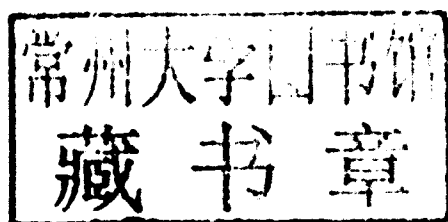
Daniel R. Schwarz

WILEY Blackwell

Reading the European Novel to 1900

A Critical Study of Major Fiction
from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*
to Zola's *Germinal*

Daniel R. Schwarz



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This edition first published 2014

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Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schwarz, Daniel R., author.

Reading the European Novel to 1900 : a Critical Study of Major Fiction from Cervantes' Don Quixote to Zola's *Germinal* / Daniel R. Schwarz.

pages cm. – (Reading the novel)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3047-2 (hardback)

1. Fiction—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN3491.S38 2015

809.3—dc23

2014007165

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Monet, *La gare d'Argenteuil*, 1872. © Conseil Général du Val d'Oise/photo J-Y Lacôte

Set in 10/12.5pt Minion by Aptara Inc., New Delhi, India

Printed and bound in Malaysia by Vivar Printing Sdn Bhd

Reading the European Novel to 1900

READING THE NOVEL

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As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one
full of adventure, full of discovery,
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon – don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body,
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon – you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

(Constantine P. Cavafy, "Ithaka," trans. Gail Holst-Warhaft)

For Marcia Jacobson – life partner, perceptive novel reader,
splendid editor – with love and appreciation

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the strong support of Emma Bennett, Publisher, Literature, Social Sciences, and Humanities Division, Wiley Blackwell, with whom I have had a productive professional relationship for many years. Brigitte Lee Messenger capably and thoughtfully managed the production process from copy-editing through proofreading and indexing.

Teaching Cornell students at every level from freshmen to graduate students over the past 46 years has helped me refine my understanding of how novels work and what they say. Much of the credit for whatever I accomplish as a scholar-critic goes to the intellectual stimulation provided by my students as well as my colleagues.

My wife, Marcia Jacobson, to whom I owe my greatest debt, has read every word of the manuscript more than once and has given me countless suggestions.

My longtime Cornell friend and colleague Brett de Bary helped me understand translation theory and recommended the texts I should read on that subject. My Cornell colleague Gail Holst-Warhaft generously provided an original translation of Cavafy's "Ithaka." Professor Coleen Culleton (Buffalo University) gave me helpful advice on the *Don Quixote* chapter. A number of colleagues at Cornell and elsewhere, including Professor Caryl Emerson (Princeton), pointed me in the right direction when choosing translations.

It gives me great pleasure to thank two gifted students who have done independent study projects with me and who have contributed to the final manuscript. Natalia Fallas was a great help in editing, proofreading, and indexing. Joseph Mansky played an important role in early stages of the research.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the continued support of the Cornell English Department and in particular Vicky Brevetti.

Daniel R. Schwarz
Ithaca, New York
May 6, 2014

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Odyssey of Reading Novels

She speaks of complexities of translation,
its postcolonial and diasporic nature,
how translated text
is torn from original
as if it were unwillingly
sundered from its parent.

As she triumphantly
concludes her perfectly
paced performance,
she crosses her arms,
returning to herself
as if to say
her ideas have been
translated into words
as best she could.

("Brett de Bary," Daniel R. Schwarz)

Beginnings

This book, the first of a two-volume study, includes major novels published before 1900 that are frequently taught in European novel courses. The high tide of the European novel was the nineteenth century but no discussion of the European novel can ignore *Don Quixote*. Thus there is well over a two hundred-year

Reading the European Novel to 1900: A Critical Study of Major Fiction from Cervantes' Don Quixote to Zola's Germinal, First Edition. Daniel R. Schwarz.

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jump from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1615) to Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830) and *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) and Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot* (1835). Much of this study deals with works by the great Russians: Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877).¹ Among the French nineteenth-century novelists, in addition to the aforementioned, I include Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and *Sentimental Education* (1869) and Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885).

I have been rereading most of these books for a lifetime, although important new translations of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Cervantes have been published in recent decades. But do we really reread or is every reading a fresh reading? As Verlyn Klinkenborg rightly observes, "The real secret of re-reading is simply this: It is impossible. The characters remain the same, and the words never change, but the reader always does."² We are different readers each time we pick up a text, maybe a different reader each day, changed ever so slightly depending on our life experience, our psyche that day, and the texts we are reading. For reading is a transaction in which the text changes us even as we change the text. While Klinkenborg has written that, "Part of the fun of re-reading is that you are no longer bothered by the business of finding out what happens" (*ibid.*), I find that rereading makes me aware of nuances I missed, even while making me aware that my memory of what happens is not accurate. What we recall is not a novel but a selection and arrangement of the novel, and as time passes what we retain is a memory of a memory rather than the full text in all its plenitude.

I am addressing the novels under discussion not only diachronically but also synchronically. That is, I am aware of the evolution of the novel and how major novels strongly influence their successors. For example, we will see in *Don Quixote* how the first person narrator's familiarity with his readers, his combining realism with fantasy and tall tale, his efforts to distinguish story from history, provide a model for subsequent novels, including *The Brothers Karamazov*. As Harold Bloom would argue, each major novelist is a strong misreader of his predecessors and thus each is also an original. We read major texts, as T. S. Eliot rightly contended in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," not only in the context of their predecessors and the possible influence of those predecessors, but also in the context of their successors. Thus each major work changes our view of its predecessors.

I also want to think of the novels on which I focus as being in conversation with one another, as if they were all present simultaneously at the same discussion or colloquium and were making claims for how and why they exist. Put another way, if we substitute "words" for "object," our novelists are all following Jasper Johns's oft-repeated axiom for art: "Take an object. Do something

to it. Do something else to it.”³ I want to think about what is unique to what the novelist in each *doing* has created, and how these *doings* are similar and different.

I have not written completely symmetrical chapters. But each of my chapters will: (1) first and foremost provide a close reading of the novel or novels under discussion; (2) speak to what defines the essence of the author’s oeuvre; (3) place the focal novel or novels within the context of the author’s canon and culture; and (4) define the author’s aesthetic, cultural, political, and historical significance. On occasion, I may focus on two works within a chapter when one adumbrates or complements the other.

We read in part to learn the wisdom of experience that the novelist fused in his vision of life and his historical scope. Those who provide notable wisdom include Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Stendhal, and Balzac. These writers at times show what Thomas Mann – who might have been writing about himself – called in an essay on Theodor Fontaine, “classic old men, ordained to show humanity the ideal qualities of that last stage of life: benignity, kindness, justice, humor, and shrewd wisdom – in short a recrudescence on a higher plane of childhood’s ancient unrestraint.”⁴ Of course there is no particular age when one achieves such a temperament. As we shall see in my Volume 2, Mann, writing *Death in Venice* in his thirties, as well as Albert Camus, had this temperament at quite an early age, and it pervades every page of Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*.

Why are there no women novelists in my study of the European novel to 1900? While Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot played a pivotal role in defining the nineteenth-century English novel, women played a much less important role in the European novel. Few would argue that George Sand (the pseudonym of Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, 1804–1876) was the equal of the aforementioned French novelists.

We do have fully realized and psychologically complex women characters in the person of the title characters of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* as well as the Marchesa in *The Charterhouse of Parma* and Natasha in *War and Peace*. But in too many of the included novels, the women are depicted as objects of desire and relatively passive figures, as Madonnas or Mary Magdalenes, innocents or whores. Some of the more passive figures, like Grushenka in *The Brothers Karamazov*, do have some aspects of complexity.

Usually in the European novel before 1900, women – even fully realized ones – are not as intellectually gifted or ambitious in terms of achievement as men, and seem to be the creations of men who do not think of women as equals. How these male writers think of women is culturally determined, but it is hard not to wish for something more. It is the English novel where female writers – Austen, Brontës, Woolf – and their characters make their mark.

Indeed, even the male writers such as Dickens and Thackeray create more vibrant, rounded women characters than we usually find in the European novel.

Since I am writing in English, I occasionally make comparisons to the English and American literary traditions. It is by similarities and differences – the entire context of major novel texts – that we best understand how novels work formally and thematically.

The Function of Literature: What Literature Is and Does

According to Lionel Trilling, “[L]iterature has a unique relevance ... because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”⁵

Literature is a report on human experience, but, we need to ask, does its aesthetic form make it a privileged report and, if so, privileged in what way? Is literature part of the history of ideas, or only in a special sense where the aesthetic inflects the ideas? As a cause, literature, I argue, affects its historical context – its *Zeitgeist* – but literature is also a result of its historical context. Imaginative literature and, in particular, novels are indexes of a culture as well as critiques, but they do not – nor do other arts – exist in some separate higher universe. As Michael Chabon asserts, “[T]he idea for a book, the beckoning fair prospect of it, is the dream; the writing of it is breakfast-table recitation, groping, approximation, and ultimately, always, a failure. *It was not like that at all*.... The limits of language are not the stopping points, says [James Joyce’s] the *Wake*; they are the point at which we must begin to tell the tale.”⁶

In this study, I try to balance the *how* with the *what*, and to balance the way that novels give us insight into human experience at a particular time and place and have significance for contemporary readers with how that is accomplished in terms of aesthetic choices and strategies. What a story means is why most readers read, and it is naïve and iconoclastic to think otherwise. How and what – form and content – are inextricably related.

What we read becomes part of our lives and how we experience both our culture and prior cultures. As David Foster Wallace observed, “Human beings are narrative animals: every culture countenances itself as culture via story, whether mythopoeic or politico-economic; every whole person understands his lifetime as an organized, recountable series of events and changes with at least a beginning and a middle. We need narrative like we need space-time.”⁷

Traditional novels present the illusion of a comprehensible and at least partially rational world, with recognizable cause and effect shaping character and – beginning with the High Modern period (1890–1950) – the psyche. But we need

to remind ourselves that there are other strands of novel history that eschew realism and rely more on romance, folklore, fantasy, myth, play, magic – including linguistic pyrotechnics – and deliberate send-ups of realism. In this study, *Don Quixote* may be the purest example, but Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* and especially *The Charterhouse of Parma* partake of this alternate tradition, one in which the very idea that books represent life is called into question. In English we think of Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman* and Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, as well as, more recently, the work of Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie; in Spanish, we have the magic realism tradition of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez, among many others. As we shall see in my second volume, such Kafka texts as *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* take the reader into a surrealist world where normative cause and effect are suspended.

In general, especially in longer novels in the realistic tradition, characters need to typify a way of living a particular time and place and be shown to respond to social issues and political questions. Are the constructed imagined worlds of longer novels in which we live as readers for days, perhaps even weeks, different from the imagined worlds of short novels? What does it mean to say a novel has amplitude? For longer novels to qualify as masterworks, usually they need to raise major philosophical questions about what gives human life meaning and purpose and/or major political questions about how a country should be organized legally and morally.

By contrast, the very pace of shorter novels can be an asset. Their focus is usually on the dilemmas facing one man or woman, as in such short novels as *Heart of Darkness*, *The Secret Sharer*, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, *Daisy Miller*, or *The Dead*. Great short novels have the taut unity of poetry and short stories, with every word relating to major themes, and an experienced reader observes that unity – indeed, teleology – at first reading.

Longer novels often take a rereading to see how the discrete parts relate and may contain digressive material – such as Tolstoy's iterative commentaries on history and warfare that at times seem tangential even to a rereader – or characters that stray far from the center of the reader's consciousness and drift on the edges of our memory of the novel. In shorter novels, every character – indeed, every sentence – matters, in part because in one reading or even two within a day or so, we retain whatever the book presents.

In our age of shortened attention spans defined by smart phones, Twitter, social media, and Google searches, some of the masterworks I am discussing seem endless, especially to younger readers. Now when I assign a middle-length novel of four or five hundred pages, students respond the way earlier generations of students responded to 1,000 pages.

Recurring Themes

For most of the novel's history, notwithstanding the exceptions to realism I mentioned above, novels depended on relevance to historical contexts and contemporary social issues. As Georg Lukács observes, "Realists such as Balzac or Tolstoy in their final posing of questions always take the most important, burning problems of their community for their starting-point; their pathos as writers is always stimulated by those sufferings of the people which are the most acute at the time."⁸

Of course, the realistic tradition is still important today, as Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Philipp Meyer's *American Rust*, and the novels of Saul Bellow and Ian McEwan make clear. As we shall see, major novels often had something of a pedagogical function even if they were not outright polemical and didactic – and they could be that too. Novels were expected to be readable and tell a story, but also expected to make you think. Although there were many exceptions, major novelists were less likely than today's novelists to write an account of the author's personal feelings – often in the voice of the narrator – and more likely to speak of social and political contexts. This was even truer of the European novel in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century than it was of the British and American novel of the same period.

European novels tend to balance the study of individuals' idiosyncrasies and families with a panoramic view of how political, cultural, and economic factors shape the ways that an individual thinks and behaves. Social hierarchies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe were different from our purported democratic and egalitarian twenty-first-century values, although we are still very much a stratified society with racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequities. In Russia especially, hierarchy was inherent in the social system; the aristocracy didn't court social inferiors but were expected to protect them and further their interests. Of course, there were abuses not only in Russia but also in most countries. In France, the French Revolution tried to redress some of those social incongruities and abuses, but with the Restoration and subsequent regimes, these abuses and inequalities continued in some form.

Recurring themes in our novels are the transformation of agrarian life due to machinery and the concomitant effect on traditional rural communities, the rise of capitalism, the evolution of the modern city, the attraction and disappointment of urban life, and the creation of a class of underemployed workers. Often reflected within our novels is class division, sometimes perceived more acutely by us twenty-first-century readers than by the authors.

In writing of the cultural and socio-economic significance of railroads Tony Judt observes, "[After 1830] trains – or, rather, the tracks on which they ran – represented the conquest of space."⁹ Railroads transformed the landscape of